

General digest and reflections on “12 Rules of Life — an Antidote to Chaos” by Jordan Peterson

Before you read

If you have not read the Foreword and Overture already, please do. It is way more than the typical formalities thanking the publisher and/or proofreaders. The Foreword gives insight into why these ‘rules’ are what we need and why it is a lot easier to each regulate our lives instead of that of others to build a better world.

This is intended as a reading aid for those who have read the book understand its central ideas. It is to be read *in supplement of* the chapters/rules in the book and not instead of them. The good news is that you are probably not in need of writing a report on this book so the reading is purely for your benefit.

Jordan Peterson is a staunch defender of freedom of speech, which is ebbed away with increasing speed in the name of political correctness. This interview video on YouTube will explain a lot:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aMcjxSThD54&t=53s>

The interviewer was very aggressively shoving words into his mouth and most sane people would not be able to tolerate her attacks but Peterson calmly dismissed any such attempts and even won the argument in the end. More relevant to Rule 1 later, pay attention to Cathy Newman’s facile logic about lobsters and human beings. If you cannot finish this interview, here’s a meme summary:



Rule 1 Stand up straight with your shoulders back

Lobsters are territorial crustaceans, like many other species including us. Despite their relatively simple nervous structure, they observe rules that apply to human society, such as pecking orders and conflict resolution.

Pecking orders and competition are common in nature for survival, one can see this system of 'who's who' in many species, including songbirds that seem so peacefully singing in mating seasons. They developed mechanisms to define victory without getting into a real fight, so that both competing parties end up safe from harm and a hiding third party cannot take advantage of the combat.

In the case of lobsters the need for safe shelter is a matter of life and death, it is so important sometimes they are willing to go into violent fights for it: as they moult (shedding an old shell and taking almost two months to grow a new one) they become completely vulnerable and a safe nook is a must.

The winner lobsters get the best hideouts to stay and to hunt from and even get the best girls, so to speak. The losers could face a much worse future:

'If a dominant lobster is badly defeated, its brain basically dissolves. Then it grows a new, subordinate's brain — one more appropriate to its new, lowly position. It's original brain just isn't sophisticated enough to manage the transformation from king to bottom dog without virtually complete dissolution and regrowth.' (pp.6-7)

Of course, this is not to say that we should be aggressive and ruthless to others in human society as well, otherwise Cathy Newman's approach would have worked in the Channel 4 interview. What Jordan Peterson himself taught us in that interview is that it pays to be confident and to stand your ground. This perhaps makes even more sense not just facing hardships, but also when epidemics run rampant: keep your head and serotonin up.

Serotonin helps one maintain confidence. One with high serotonin and low octopamine would tend to a more upright and appealing general posture. Of course lobsters that have a good share of the 'natural high' get all the best shelters, grounds, girls and breed the best offsprings. In short, they are the winners of their 'society'. They are successful. They have made it to the top.

Peterson has some interesting observations about the term 'natural selection'. We seem to take the word 'nature' for granted and easily try to explain many things away as 'unnatural'. Here a nice quote from Mark Twain is wittily apt:

'It's not what we don't know that gets us in trouble. It's what we know for sure that just ain't so.' (p. 12)

Peterson states that nature is neither static or simply dynamic, as there are layers and layers within nature that change in different speeds. Nor is nature active or consistent. More importantly, nature is definitely not a benign motherly figure, like many environmental activists would tell us romantically. Nature is not even cruel: it just doesn't care. Just consider how many viruses come from nature throughout history and the picture will be clear.

The main idea from Peterson is that nature is connected to our culture, not just to the weather, as dominance hierarchies were in nature before there were trees.

So what more reasons do we need to stand up straight with our shoulders back?

In my training in music school I came across a very popular class called Alexander Technique, which deals with body issues of musicians related to their performances. In the first class we were all told to practice holding our heads high as if there were strings at the top of our skulls pulling us up. Interestingly, in the next class many of us reported 'feeling taller' and things even looking more positive for some of us. Pulling the head up might not look a lot but the view does get better. One will really need to try in order to find out.

This brings things to what Peterson describes as a 'positive feedback loop', the term of which is self-explanatory. In these funny times, a mind that is more positive is far less likely to panic and go on a toilet paper shopping spree. One who does not spend energy panicking tends to have a better immune system.

I find these words very sound:

'Thus emboldened, you will embark on the voyage of your life, let your light shine, so to speak, on the heavenly hill, and pursue your rightful destiny. Then the meaning of your life may be sufficient to keep the corrupting influence of mortal despair at bay.' (p. 28)